

# Understanding Restraint & Isolation in Washington Schools

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## Study Overview

This study is part of a larger state project to reduce the use of restraint and eliminate isolation. During the 2023 legislative session, the Washington State Legislature proposed House Bill (HB) 1479, a measure which would have prohibited isolation and further restricted restraint in public schools. Despite successfully moving through the House of Representatives, the bill failed to pass in the Senate. Subsequently, AIR was contracted by OSPI to gather data from education constituents around the use of restraint and isolation in schools. The goals of the project were as follows:

1. Gather perspectives on the current practices and challenges related to restraint and isolation (R&I) and its impact on the education workforce.
2. Propose recommendations to address Washington State’s specific challenges in passing legislation around R&I practices informed by Washington educators, leaders, professional organizations, families, and students.

Figure 1 depicts the project scope. AIR set out in fall 2023 through January 2024 to gather perspectives of educators across the state. In March 2024 AIR hosted a Community Day to develop recommendations. OSPI identified demonstration sites, and the yellow highlighted box in Figure 1 indicates the step we are on as of June 2024. Technical assistance will begin in August 2024 under a separate contract.

### Project Scope



*Note.* This figure represents the scope of the project. The yellow outline refers to the current stage of the project.

## Background

- Washington State law says that incidents of restraint and isolation are permitted only in the event of an emergency in which the student is at imminent risk of inflicting serious harm to themselves or others. The current policy states restraint or isolation of any student should only occur when it is “reasonably necessary to control spontaneous behavior that poses an imminent likelihood of serious harm, as defined in RCW 70.96B.010.”
- However, there is misunderstanding from practitioners about what constitutes restraint and isolation, when it is necessary, and how to use it appropriately when it is necessary.
- The report [\*Coming Into the Light: An Examination of Restraint and Isolation Practices in Washington Schools\*](#) (Kadlec et al., 2023), published by [ACLU of Washington](#) and [Disability Rights Washington](#), found that **in 2020–21, students with disabilities made up 93% of those subject to restraint and over 96% of students subject to isolation, even though they make up only 15% of the student population.**
- The report also identified that Black students, students with disabilities, and students in foster care were disproportionately affected by these practices.

“Restraint and isolation are used primarily on elementary school students, young children who are still learning how to regulate their behavior and who are especially vulnerable to harm by restraint and isolation. These practices are disabling, emotionally and psychologically damaging, and profoundly impact students.”  
– *Coming into the Light* (Kadlec et al., 2023)

## Methodology

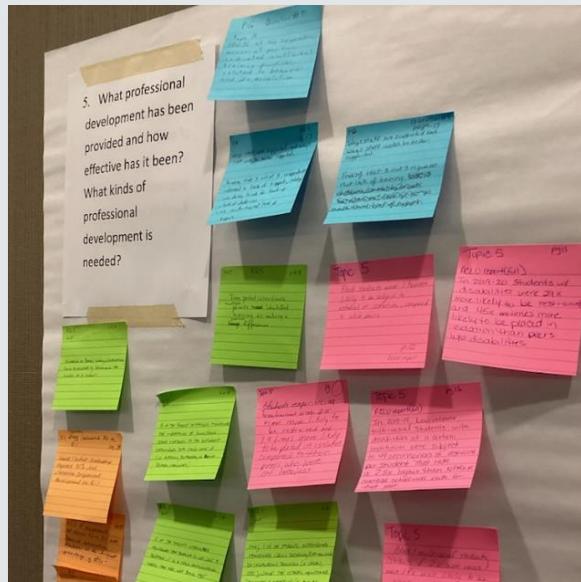
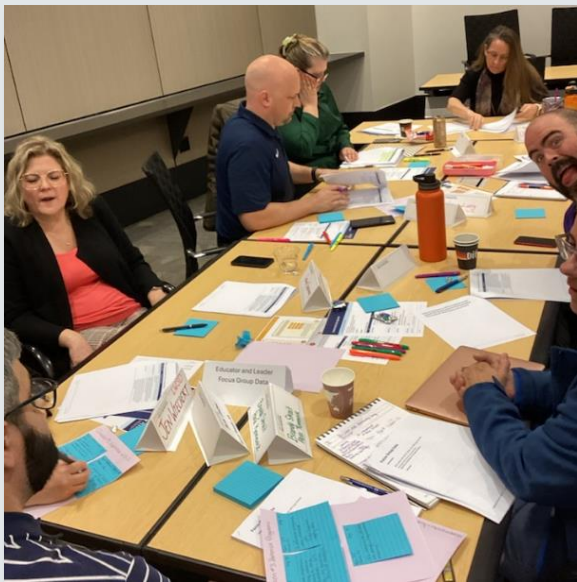
To collect data on the current understanding of restraint and isolation policy and its impact on educators, students, and families, AIR developed an online survey, conducted in-person and virtual focus groups with education professionals, conducted virtual interviews with parents and their children, and presented data from an ACLU and DRW report about restraint and isolation use.

- Washington restraint and isolation policies survey:
  - The survey was shared with educators through an online link sent by OSPI that was available to educators for 3 weeks. The survey was completed by 1,773 education professionals who varied in position from classified staff to special education directors and represented 69% of school districts in Washington.
  - The survey asked respondents questions pertaining to their understanding of and perspective on their districts’ policies and resources on restraint and isolation, their perspectives on the support they receive and their own well-being surrounding incidents of restraint and isolation, and their recommendations and suggestions on reform restraint and isolation policy and professional development needs.
  - Racial demographics were not collected to maintain participants’ anonymity.

- Washington restraint and isolation policies focus groups:
  - AIR facilitated 14 (six in-person and eight virtual) focus groups of educators, paraprofessionals, and school and district leaders. In these confidential sessions, participants were asked open-ended questions related to restraint and isolation policies, their experiences with restraint and isolation as well as the support and well-being felt during and after using restraint and isolation, and their recommendations and suggestions on existing policy and professional development.
- Washington restraint and isolation policies parent and student interviews:
  - AIR facilitated 12 individual virtual interviews with students and their parents with lived experience of restraint and isolation.
  - Families represented diverse backgrounds and perspectives. Families were from different parts of the state, had children both at the elementary and the high school level, and were of various ethnic and linguistic backgrounds including Indian, Hispanic, and White.
  - Two families were Spanish speaking; one interview was conducted in Spanish.
  - Students were asked about the support they received at school and their recommendations on how they can be better supported. Separately from their children, parents were asked about how their children could be better supported in schools, how the safety and support of themselves and their children had been impacted by restraint and isolation, and recommendations and suggestions on existing policy and professional development.
  - Students and parents were not asked to recount their experience or details but rather to share the long-term impact and provide recommendations for change.
- Co-Interpretation at Community Day event:
  - A diverse representation of Washington education professionals, labor union representatives, state leaders, and parents came together to co-interpret data, determine priorities, and make recommendations.
  - AIR facilitated its proprietary co-interpretation process to engage all education partners, including parents, in the analysis and interpretation of data collected.
  - Together, participants analyzed data and developed priorities and recommendations for changes in policy and practice.

## Community Day

AIR facilitated its co-interpretation process among a diverse group of Washingtonian participants, with outcomes of co-interpreting data, determining priorities, and offering recommendations.



## Findings and Recommendations

After consolidating and reviewing the findings, participants prioritized findings by which ones were of greatest concern. Below we summarize concerns identified by Washington education community members in order of priority.

***Of great concern is the disproportionality in students impacted by R&I. Students who are male, low income, Black, multiracial, experiencing homelessness and/or in foster care, or have a disability experience R&I at a higher rate compared to their percentage of the population.***

One significant finding is disproportionality in the groups of students experiencing restraint and isolation, particularly concerning students from specific demographic backgrounds. According to a report by Kadlec et al. (2023; see Exhibits 1.1–1.5), students who are Black, are multiracial, have disabilities, identify as male, live in low-income households, are currently in foster care, or are experiencing homelessness are subjected to restraint and isolation with disproportionately higher frequency compared to their peers. Despite constituting a minority within the student body, these demographic groups endure significantly elevated instances and rates of restraint and isolation.

### Exhibit 1.1. Racial Disproportionality in Students Who Experience Restraint and Isolation

*Black and multiracial students are disproportionately likely to be subject to restraint or isolation, compared to their White peers (Kadlec et al., 2023).*

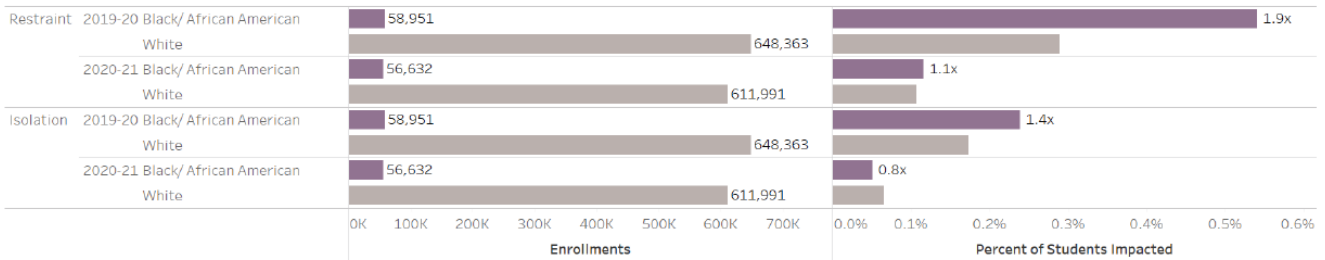


Figure 9: Disparities in Restraint and Isolation Practices--Black/African American Students

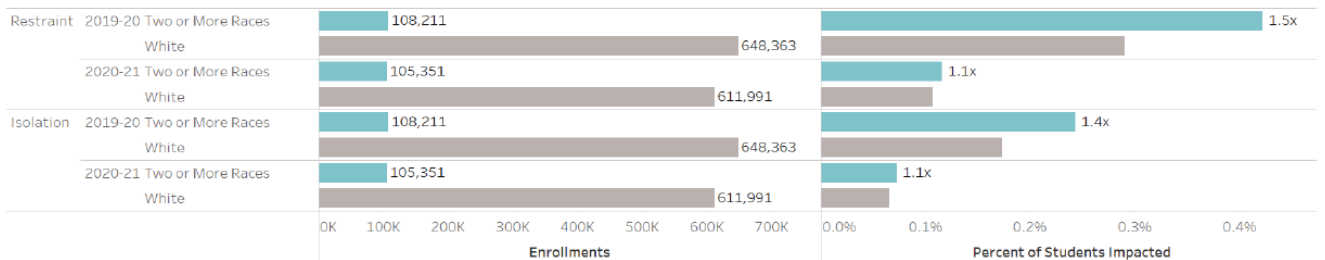


Figure 10: Disparities in Restraint and Isolation Practices--Multi-Racial Students

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**Exhibit 1.2. Disability Status, Gender, and Economic Disproportionality in Students Who Experience Restraint and Isolation**

*Regardless of grade level, most students subjected to restraint or isolation in Washington are students with disabilities, male, and/or students from low-income families.*

Table 1: Share of Restraint and Isolation Occurrences by Student Group

School Year	Student Group	Share of Enrollment	Share of restraints	Share of isolations
2019-20	Students with Disabilities	15%	93%	93%
	Male Students	52%	87%	88%
	Low-Income Students	46%	67%	65%
2020-21	Students with Disabilities	15%	96%	94%
	Male Students	52%	85%	89%
	Low-Income Students	45%	64%	62%

**Exhibit 1.3. Disproportionality of Students in Foster Care Who Experience Restraint and Isolation**

*Based on the OSPI’s analysis, which is limited to 2019–20 data, students in foster care are disproportionately likely to be subject to restraint or isolation compared with their representation in the student population.*

Table 2. 2019-20 Students in Foster Care Experiencing Restraint and Isolation

Grade Level	Share of Enrolled Students	Share of Impacted Students	Share of Enrolled Students Relative to Share of Impacted Students
K-5	0.9%	7.1%	7.9
6-8	0.8%	10.2%	12.8
9-12	0.8%	4.0%	5.0

Graphs reprinted with permission.

### Exhibit 1.4. Disproportionality of Students in Low-Income Families or Experiencing Homelessness Who Experience Restraint and Isolation

Low-income students and students experiencing homelessness are disproportionately more likely to be subject to restraint or isolation compared with their counterparts not in those groups.

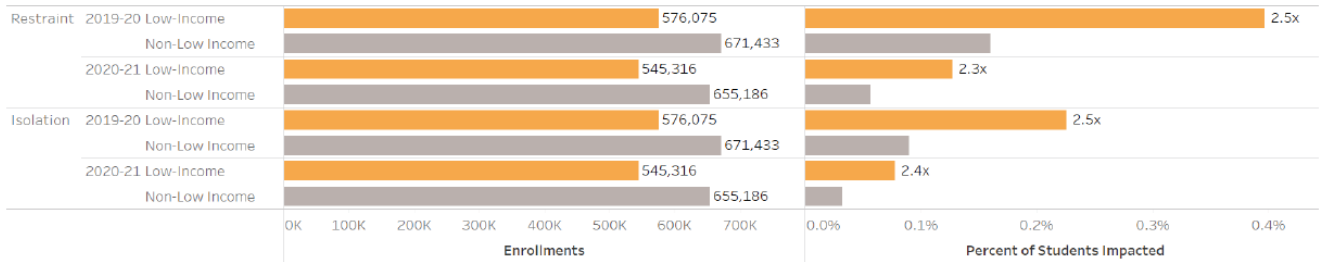


Figure 11: Disparities In Restraint and Isolation Practices--Low-Income Students

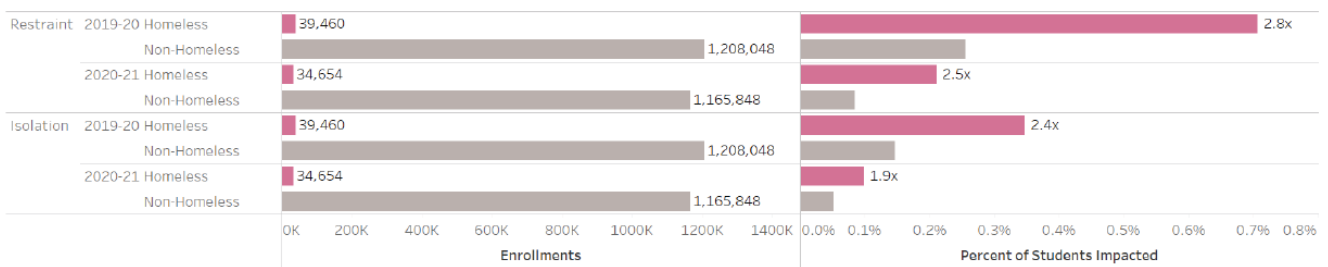


Figure 12: Disparities In Restraint and Isolation Practices--Homeless Students

### Exhibit 1.5. Disproportionality of Students With Disabilities Who Experience Restraint and Isolation

Students with disabilities are disproportionately likely to be subject to restraint or isolation compared with their peers without disabilities.

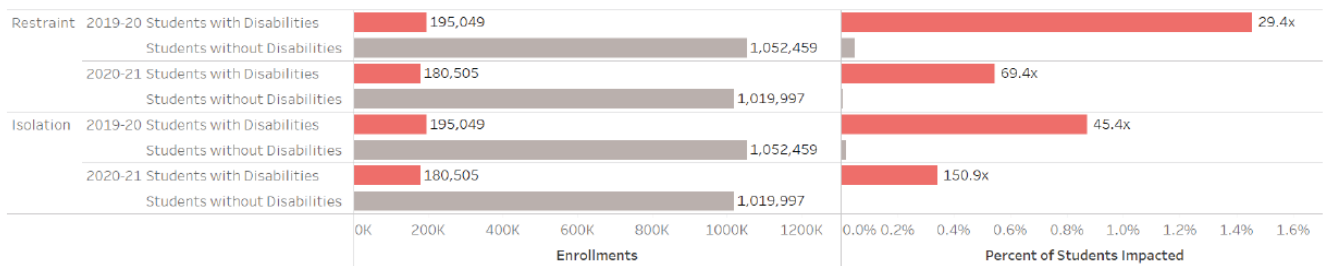


Figure 8: Disparities In Restraint and Isolation Practices--Students with Disabilities

Graphs reprinted with permission.

***Both parents and educators report a lack of appropriate systems to prevent escalations and strategies to better respond when they occur.***

Parents and educators pinpointed deficiencies in the systems and procedures implemented in schools to prevent and mitigate escalations. One significant obstacle identified is unequal access to professional development and external support services across different school districts. Moreover, a common challenge observed across districts is insufficient funding allocated for staff training in de-escalation techniques. It has been noted that timely implementation of de-escalation strategies is more efficacious when managing escalating situations. Consequently, a crucial takeaway and proposed action point arising from collaborative analysis is the necessity to establish improved mechanisms for de-escalation, ultimately aiming to diminish the reliance on restraint and isolation measures.

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“Where I am, in rural areas, we don’t have access to outside resources, presenters, collaborators. And so we’re really limited to what the building administrator knows and is comfortable with, or who they can quickly tap in maybe from the ESD [Educational Service District], if they can afford that contract. And so it’s not equitable what everyone is having access to.”

– *Special education director*

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**Exhibit 2. Supporting Parent Interview and Focus Group Quotes**

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“The funding piece is huge, getting people trained, getting the people that proper support, paying paras. If we need to have a debrief meeting because an escalation happen[s], can we pay them to stay a half hour longer so we can have an authentic debrief and process through? That doesn’t just affect our practice, that affects the mental health of our staff. If they have a huge escalation they experience and then they don’t get a debrief and then they’re just going home hoping that that doesn’t happen tomorrow, that wears on the mental health and that increases that burnout.”

– *Administrator*

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***Parents and students agree that safe spaces, and the staff within them, should be available for students to de-escalate, self-soothe, and self-regulate.***

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“I always try to find a safe space.... I’ll always head into my history teacher’s classroom... because I know he boxes and I feel safe. And I feel safe there.”

– *Student*

“I think it’s also just helpful, if you don’t really know the counselors, you could just go to a teacher that you really like or something or that you trust and talk with them.”

– *Student*

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Another key finding is the necessity of providing students with safe spaces and trusted adults to facilitate de-escalation, self-soothing, and self-regulation. Parent interviews noted consistent accounts from both parents and students affirming that having designated spaces to de-escalate and supportive adults to confide in proved instrumental in managing escalating situations (Exhibit 3.1). This underscores the critical importance of affording students the opportunities and resources to effectively de-escalate, ultimately mitigating the reliance on restraint and isolation measures.

### **Exhibit 3.1. Supporting Parent Interview Quotes**

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“If [my son’s] kind of agitated, [the teacher] is probably going to say, ‘[Student’s name], do you want to take this stuffy, special stuffy and go under my desk until you feel good and happy and excited? And do you need a snack?’ She’s going to greet him by name. She’s going to be warm. And again, this is also a cultural connection that we’re lucky to have, but she’s going to be kind.

“Just the warmth and all that’s going to do that has the effect of a drug of calming, warmth, and soothing. And we have a relationship. I’m kneeling down at your level. I’m looking you in the eye. I’m seeing that.”

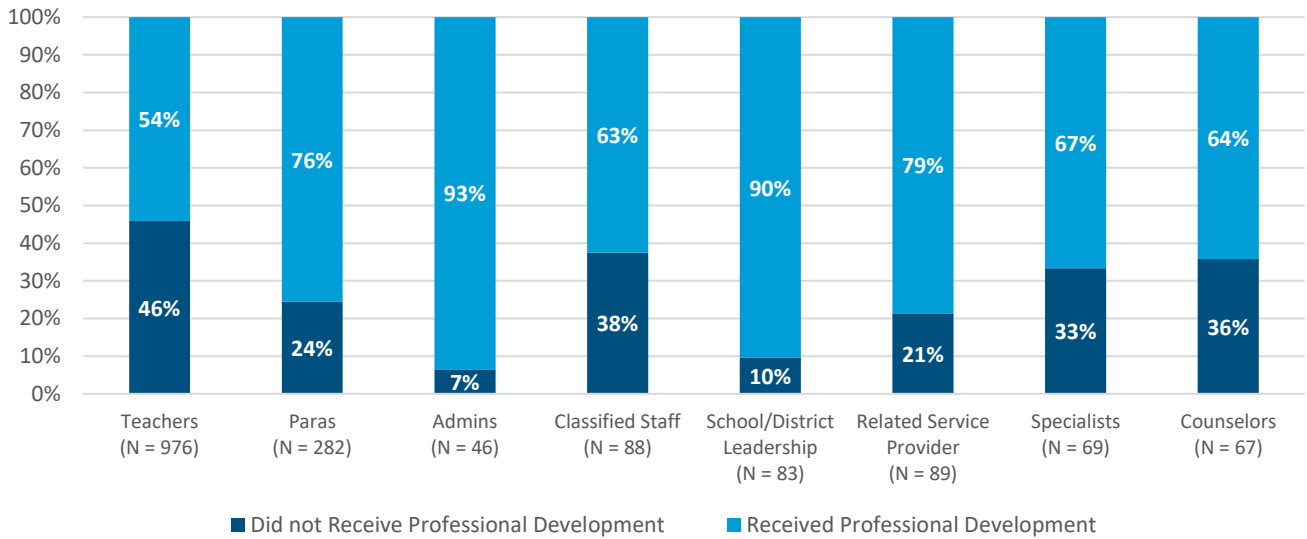
– Parent

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### ***Professional development content and quantity is inconsistently delivered across school staffing groups. A majority of educators reported they did not receive enough professional development on restraint and isolation.***

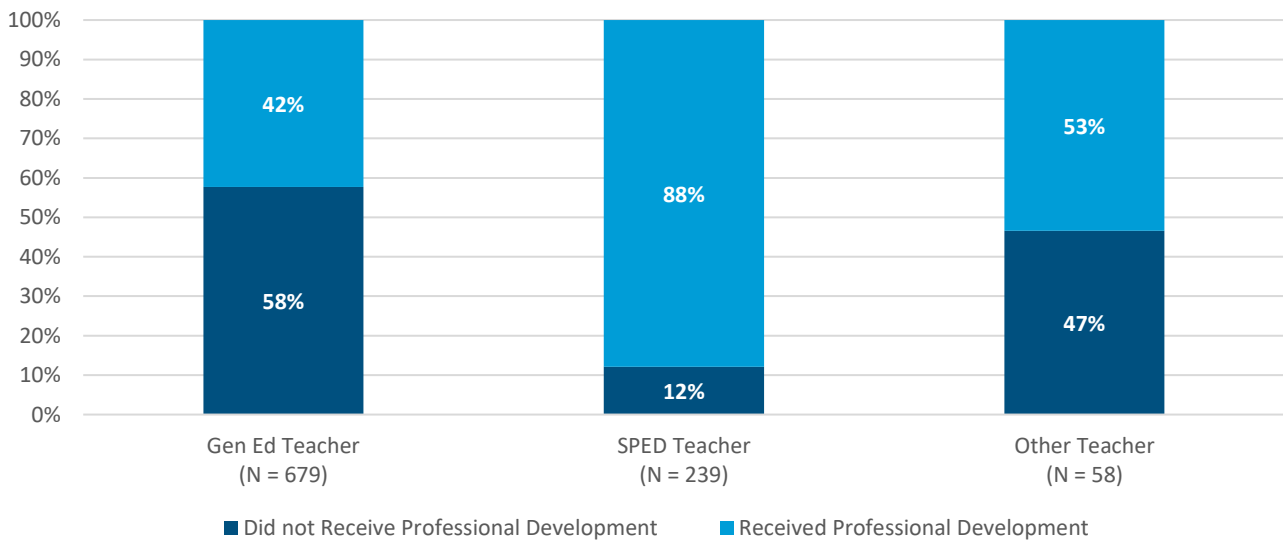
Lack of access to and quality of professional development is identified as a key area of concern for current restraint and isolation practices. Survey data underscored this concern, revealing that teachers reported the lowest amount of professional development on restraint and isolation across staffing groups (Exhibit 4.1). Moreover, less than half of general education teachers reported receiving any professional development on these practices (Exhibit 4.2). Testimonials from teachers and an administrator further echoed these sentiments, highlighting the deficient access to and quality of professional development in their schools (Exhibit 4.3). Collectively, these findings underscore the overarching conclusion that the content and caliber of professional development available are insufficient.

**Exhibit 4.1. Percentage of Staff Who Received Professional Development on Restraint and/or Isolation or Other Behavioral Interventions, by Respondent’s Job Title**



*Note.* Forty-eight respondents did not provide a job title, and an additional five respondents did not answer this question and were not included in this graph. School/district leadership consists of district resource officers (DROs), deans, principals, and superintendents; classified staff consists of custodians, medical staff, security, transportation staff, and other school staff; related service providers include speech language pathologists, school psychologists and so on; specialists include reading specialists, behavior intervention specialists, and so on.

**Exhibit 4.2. Percentage of Staff Who Received Professional Development on Restraint and/or Isolation or Other Behavioral Interventions, by Type of Teacher**



*Note.* In total, 994 teachers participated in this survey: 693 general education (Gen Ed) teachers, 242 special education (SPED) teachers, and 59 other teachers. Of these, 14 Gen Ed teachers, 3 SPED teachers, and 1 other teacher did not answer this question.

### Exhibit 4.3. Supporting Focus Group Quotes

“I don’t know any other job where an adult would be intervening in a way that is so delicate and with so much liability where you only get 2 days of training.”

– Teacher

“You get your training once a year and then somehow that’s supposed to just get you through the rest of the year without any kind of follow-up or conversation with coworkers about what’s working, what’s not working, and that sort of thing.”

– Teacher

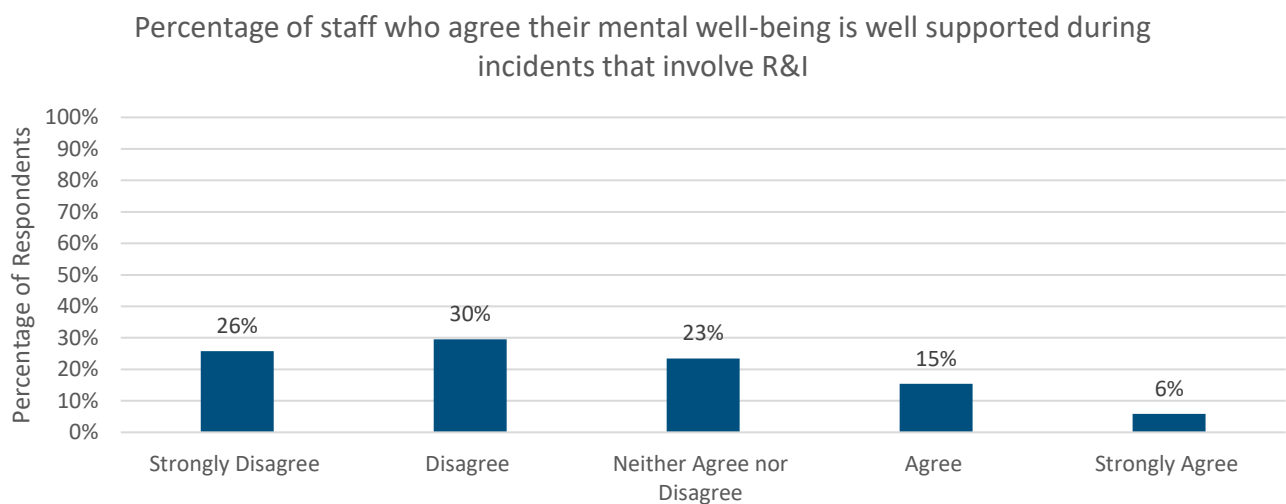
“The training is a critical component of it. Who are your trainers? What does training look like? How much are you coming back together to provide those in-between moments? It truly is left up to districts to figure most of that out...but it is unfunded and it is left up to each district to try to implement as best as we can, which makes it challenging sometimes.”

– Administrator

### **Staff reported concerns about long-term cumulative negative impacts (e.g., lack of well-being, trauma, safety) related to incidents of R&I for both staff and students.**

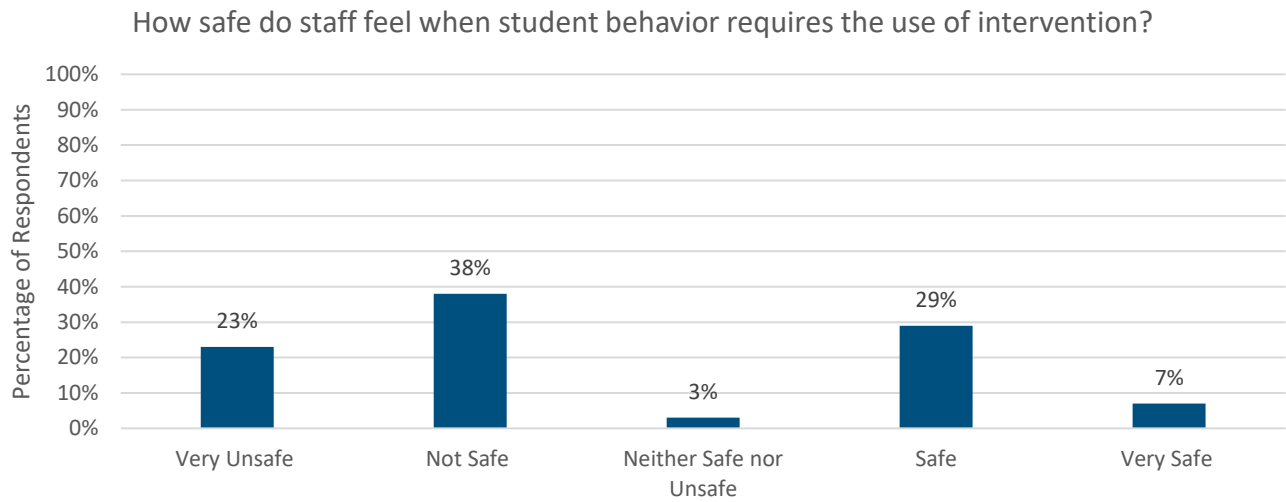
Another key finding is the adverse effects on both staff and students stemming from incidents involving restraint and isolation. Survey data revealed alarming statistics: More than half of school staff expressed disagreement with the notion that their mental well-being is adequately supported during such incidents (Exhibit 5.1). Similarly, over 60% of staff reported feeling unsafe when restraint and/or isolation measures were necessary (Exhibit 5.2). Furthermore, focus group findings illustrated the social-emotional toll inflicted on educators and students alike by these practices (Exhibit 5.3).

### **Exhibit 5.1. Staff Perspective on Whether Their Mental Well-Being Is Well Supported During Incidents That Involve Restraint and/or Isolation**



Note. Twenty-one respondents did not answer this question and were not included in this graph.

## Exhibit 5.2. Staff Feelings of Safety When Student Behavior Requires the Use of Intervention



Note. Nineteen respondents did not answer this question and were not included in this graph.

## Exhibit 5.3. Supporting Focus Group Quotes

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“The reality is that these are the children that when they ‘flip their lid’ our response causes them trauma, which then makes the school a traumatizing situation from which they have to return, to people who have been traumatized trying to help them. And that is where my heart is broken on this whole situation.... [I]t’s not about restraint and isolation. It’s about social and emotional safety, physical safety, adults and children.”

– Administrator

“The part I still worry about the most, though, is the social-emotional toll it takes. I’ve had staff members quit their positions because they’ve had a student who’s had that severe need in their classroom and they’re like, ‘I can’t do this.’”

– Administrator

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## Conclusion

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- AIR collected data from education professionals and families across the state impacted by restraint and isolation.
- Data were analyzed and interpreted in a Community Day event.
- Findings indicate that the areas of professional development, creating safe spaces, and dismantling disproportionality of impact are key findings and among top priorities for the education community.
- The cumulative physical and emotional harm to staff, students, and families is of great concern and is paramount to addressing this issue.
- Demonstration sites were identified and technical assistance will begin in August 2024 to address these and other needs related to preventing restraint and eliminating isolation in Washington.

## Next Steps

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- AIR will lead training and technical assistance for Washington districts around identifying and addressing disproportionality in R&I data. Districts can access this support free for the 2024–25 school year.
- Districts will be guided through a five-step process to identify root causes and implement an evidence-based prevention program.
- AIR will develop a Washington-specific fidelity tool for districts to assess and continuously improve implementation of evidence-based, positive, and preventative behavior programs and facilitate more equitable discipline outcomes.

## References

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Kadlec, A., Martin, M. B., & Washington, K. (2023). *Coming into the light: An examination of restraint and isolation practices in Washington schools*. Disability Rights Washington & ACLU of Washington. <https://disabilityrightswa.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Restraint-and-Isolation-Report-dist.pdf>